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The Spinster Stereotype: A Demographic Refutation?

Data on Australia's older single women are assembled into a demographic profile to question the legitimacy of the prevailing negative spinster stereotype and to make comparisons with US trends in the status of single women. The socioeconomic status (SES) of single and married women in Melbourne is analysed and it is subsequently argued that high SES single women have satisfying careers which may provide them with a stable source of identity, but some lower SES single women lack this source and may assume the spinster identity as the only clearly defined role available to them.

The consensus in the small body of literature on single women is that the older single woman, in particular, is viewed as a failure and is pitied because she has not been found 'acceptable'.¹ Not having experienced marriage and motherhood—experiences considered essential to feminine completeness—the single woman is assumed to be barren, unfulfilled and deficient in personal and social adjustment, possibly to the point of pathology.² Further characteristics which Adams believes have been attributed to single women include 'soured', repressed, garrulous, inflexible and compulsively preoccupied with trifles.³ In short, it is not uncommon, as Stolk found in an Australian study, for single women to be still stereotyped as spinsters or old maids.⁴ Accordingly, single women suffer the fate common to many stereotyped minority groups, experiencing discrimination, prejudice and social segregation; which, in this case, means segregation from the married majority.⁵

To counter what is believed to be the prevailing stereotype, the literature is providing evidence to suggest that, in reality, a significant proportion of single women display rather different attributes to those of the spinster stereotype. For example, in the United States, Baker found no differences in the above average levels of adjustment of single and married women who were members of Business and Professional

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Women's Clubs.⁶ Both groups listed their work as their major source of fulfilment. Also in the US, Bernard reported single women to be less prone to mental health impairment than married women; and although they rated themselves less happy than did married men and women, single women considered themselves more happy than did single men.⁷ In our society, people who achieve educational and occupational success are not usually considered to be 'deficient in personal and social adjustment'; yet this is how single women are characterized despite evidence showing that they *are* achieving educational and occupational success. Again in the US, Havens reports that the proportion of females who are single increases in almost direct relation to increasing income; and in Australia, McDonald found that highly educated women were more likely to be unmarried than less educated women.⁸ This kind of evidence does not accord well with the 'failed', neurotic and unfulfilled figure of the spinster stereotype. It appears that the stereotype may misrepresent at least some, if not all, single women.

The present study, which is part of a broader research program into the personality and life style of adult single women, investigates this issue. An Australian demographic profile of the adult single woman has been assembled in order to establish to what extent American trends in the status of single women are paralleled in Australia. Single women were defined as those women who were aged 30 and over who had never married. Thirty was chosen as a minimum age because the majority of women who are going to marry will have done so by that age, as is demonstrated in Table 1. In her discussion of the status of single women, Adams also set 30 as the delimiting age, and Blake found that college students believed most people should be married by age 30.⁹ Comparisons will be made with 'ever married women', a term which includes those women presently married, separated, divorced or widowed.

POPULATION FIGURES

Table 2 shows that in 1976 single women aged 30 and over in Australia comprised 6.3% of all women in the same age group. Table 2 also demonstrates that single women did not always comprise such a small proportion of the population: in 1921, 16.92% of women aged 30 and over were not married. Since that time, however, the proportion of single women has declined consistently to reach the present low figure. This trend is consistent with figures reported for Europe in 1900, when between 40 and 50% of women aged 25 to 29, and between 13 and 19% of those aged 45 to 49 were still single.¹⁰

The decline in the percentage of single women indicates that Australia has been no exception to a world wide trend for a growing proportion

TABLE 1

SINGLE WOMEN AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL WOMEN BY AGE CATEGORY—MELBOURNE STATISTICAL DIVISION

<i>Age Category</i>	<i>1971^a %</i>	<i>1976^b</i>
15-19	92.58	93.82
20-24	39.43	45.00
25-29	12.52	14.55
30-34	6.94	7.42
35-39	5.21	5.31
40-44	4.94	4.61
45-49	5.22	4.81
50-54	5.87	5.10
55-59	7.38	6.08
60-64	9.19	7.46
65-69	11.18	
70-74	12.02	
75-79	13.71	
80-84	14.97	
85-89	15.09	
90+	17.24	
		break-down not available } 11.36
	12.72	

Sources:

- ^a Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1971 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Population in Private and Non-private Dwellings—Class of Dwelling by Age by Marital Status by Sex*, Canberra, 1974.
- ^b Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1976 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Population 15 Years and Over—Age by Occupational Status by Marital Status by Sex*, Canberra, 1979.

TABLE 2

SINGLE WOMEN AGED 30 AND OVER IN AUSTRALIA
1921 TO 1976

<i>Census Year</i>	<i>Total Number of Women</i>	<i>Number of Single Women</i>	<i>SW* as % of All Women</i>
1921 ^a	1,123,395	190,083	16.92
1933	1,521,342	242,948	15.97
1947	1,952,199	256,660	13.15
1954	2,272,889	247,139	10.87
1961	2,601,451	232,097	8.92
1971 ^b	3,019,638	204,295	6.77
1976 ^c	3,269,920	205,989	6.30

* SW = Single Women.

Sources:

- ^a Years 1921-1961: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *1961 Census of Population and Housing, Australia*, Volume VIII, Canberra: CBS, 1965.
- ^b Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *1971 Census of Population and Housing, Australia*, Bulletin 3. *Demographic Characteristics. Part 9*. Canberra: CBS, 1973.
- ^c Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1976 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Birthplace by Age by Marital Status. Australia*, Canberra, 1978.

of women to marry.¹¹ However, Australian marriage rates in the period 1975-1977 have shown a decline compared with the preceding decade and this has led to speculation that the proportion of persons staying single may be on the increase.¹² On the other hand, a small concurrent rise in the median age at first marriage since 1976 suggests the possibility that marriage is being postponed and not necessarily rejected.¹³

Melbourne, where the present study is mainly focused, had a population of 45,923 single women in 1971, which comprised 7.6% of Melbourne's women aged 30 and over. In 1976 the numbers of single women had declined to 44,704, or 7.0% of women the same age.¹⁴ The age distribution figures for Melbourne's single women in Table 1 illustrate the somewhat conflicting trends for a growing proportion of women to marry, despite a tendency to marry at a later age.

Changes in marriage behaviour can be inferred from these data by examining changes in percentages of single women, both across age groups at any one time, and within a particular age category across time. The tendency for women to marry at a later age is demonstrated by an increase, from 1971 to 1976, in the proportions of women staying single between the ages of 15 and 39. The largest increment occurs in the 20 to 24 age group, which increases from 39.4% in 1971 to 45.0% in 1976.

The trend for more women to marry than in the past is illustrated by the fact that after age 39 the proportions of single women in each age group decrease from 1971 to 1976. At the same time, both in 1971 and 1976, there is a direct relationship, after age 39, between increasing age and percentages of single women. The largest proportion of single women occurs in the 90 and over age group (17.2% in 1971), who would have been of marriageable age at the turn of the century, when marriage rates were very low. A low-point in proportions of single women is reached in the 40 to 44 age group both in 1971 and in 1976, and this proportion may be taken as an indication of the proportion of women who will never marry in that particular cohort.¹⁵ The percentage of single women aged 40 to 44 declined from 4.9% in 1971 to 4.6% in 1976, showing that more women still were marrying than in preceding cohorts. Whether this trend will be maintained, in view of the increase in numbers of younger single women, remains to be seen.

Although the increase in proportions of single women in later age groups has been attributed to lower marriage rates in the past, it also might be hypothesized that this increase is due, in part, to a higher death rate for ever married women. This would leave increasing proportions of single women alive with increasing age. Data on death rates, however,

do not bear out this hypothesis. In Melbourne in 1971, single women over 30 had a death rate of 2.75 per 100 single women, compared with a rate of 1.45 per 100 ever married women in the same age group.¹⁶ Hence the linear relationship, after age 40, between percentages of single women and age may be attributed to lower marriage rates in the past.

Possibly, the slightly higher death rate for single women is due to the inclusion, in the single women's population, of those who are selected out of marriage for reasons of mental or physical handicap and who hence tend to have a higher mortality rate.¹⁷ The unwary might conclude from this (as did Landis, in the US) that a substantial number of '... those who do not marry . . . are the feeble minded, the mentally ill, the crippled, the physically handicapped, or those who suffer from chronic ill health'.¹⁸ However, Havens' US study of single women's incomes specifically refutes Landis's conclusions, and the demographic data presented here should dispel such imputations for Australian single women.¹⁹

The socioeconomic status (SES) of single women now will be analysed by examining census data on the incomes of Australian single women, as well as data on the occupational status, educational qualifications and geographical distribution of Melbourne's single women, thus providing a comprehensive demographic profile of single women.

INCOMES

As figures on the incomes of Melbourne's single women are not available at present from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australian figures are presented instead. Columns 1 and 2 of Table 3 show the distribution across income categories of employed single and ever married women for 1976 (1976 was the first time the ABS collected income data in a census). These figures demonstrate that high income earners comprise a very small proportion of employed single women: less than 3% of employed single women earn over \$15,000. In comparison, however, only 1.2% of ever married women earn over this amount. Furthermore, the median income of single women is higher, at between \$7.9,000, than that of ever married women whose median income is between \$5.7,000.

To provide a comparison with incomes in the US in 1960, Column 3 of Table 3 sets out the percentage of women who were single in each income category in 1976. The pattern which emerges from these figures closely resembles that reported by Havens for the US. Both in the US and in Australia, a direct relation exists between level of income and the proportion of single to ever married women in the category. As Havens observes, 'unmarried status among females is directly related to income'.²⁰

The only exception to this pattern in both countries is in the top income bracket, where the proportion of single women declines markedly. Some of the occupational data to be reported later may clarify this anomaly.

TABLE 3
INCOME LEVELS FOR EMPLOYED SINGLE AND EVER MARRIED WOMEN AGED 30 AND OVER—AUSTRALIA, 1976

Income Level \$	% <i>Employed SW</i> (N = 98,156)	% <i>Employed EMW*</i> (N = 1,101,393)	<i>SW as % of All Employed Women</i>
18,000+	1.09	0.65	13.03
15-18,000	1.59	0.52	21.27
12-15,000	4.90	1.63	21.15
9-12,000	13.88	5.21	19.17
7-9,000	24.77	12.31	15.20
5-7,000	25.59	27.86	7.57
2-5,000	14.76	30.16	4.18
Up to 2,000	4.30	11.18	3.32
Not stated	9.12	10.48	11.59
Total	100.00	100.00	8.18 (N = 1,199,549)

* EMW = Ever Married Women.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1976 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Employed Population—Age by Marital Status by Occupation by Annual Income by Qualifications Obtained by Sex*, Canberra, 1979.

OCCUPATIONS AND QUALIFICATIONS

The figures in Table 4 set out the occupational status of Melbourne's single and ever married women for 1971 and 1976.²¹ In 1971, 23,358 single women were in the workforce, comprising 50.86% of all single women aged 30 and over. In 1976 these figures declined to 22,101, or 49.44% of all single women. This decline accords with the population and age trends described earlier. As 43.83% of single women were aged 60 or over in 1976, it may be assumed the majority of single women not in the workforce were retired. However, this leaves approximately 6% of working age single women unaccounted for. The most recently available data on housing appear to provide an answer to this discrepancy: in 1971, 2.39% of single women were in convents and 3.72% were in hospitals (including mental hospitals) and other welfare institutions (compared with 0.97% of ever married women).²²

The data in Table 4 generally reflect the pattern found earlier in income levels. Single women are overrepresented in professional and managerial occupations relative to ever married women by a ratio of two to one: 33.76% of single and 15.40% of ever married women

TABLE 4

MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUPINGS FOR SINGLE AND EVER MARRIED WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE AGED 30 AND OVER—
MELBOURNE STATISTICAL DIVISION

Rank ²¹	Occupational Group	1971 ^a		1976 ^b	
		% SW (N= 23,358)	% EMW (N= 181,915)	% SW (N= 22,101)	% EMW (N= 225,641)
I	Professional	26.21	8.47	30.33	10.73
II	Managerial	3.51	4.42	3.43	4.67
III	Clerical	38.19	25.18	38.49	28.17
IV	Craftswomen	5.52	10.08	4.90	8.44
V	Shop Assistant/ Process Worker	10.04	25.73	9.02	21.55
VI	Unskilled	10.62	19.45	10.08	17.94
	Inadequately described	6.27	6.67	3.75	8.50
		100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Sources:

^a Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1971 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Sex by Marital Status by Occupation by Age—The Employed Population*, Canberra, 1973.

^b Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1976 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Employed Population—Sex by Marital Status by Occupation by Age*, Canberra, 1980.

worked in these occupations in 1976. In the three lower ranked occupational categories, single women were proportionately underrepresented.

Although it could be hypothesized that this is an artifact due to other professional women marrying and withdrawing from the workforce (thereby depressing the number of employed ever married professional women) data on educational qualifications set out in Table 5 do not support this proposition. (The Australian Bureau of Statistics does not classify qualifications as 'professional' or not; however, those qualifications in Table 5 which can be fairly clearly identified as professional have been marked with an asterisk.) From Table 5 it can be shown that in 1976 relatively more single women were *qualified* for professional work than ever married women, even when non-employed women were included. Nineteen per cent of single, and 7.19% of ever married women had professional qualifications. When trade and technical qualifications are included, the total increases to 25.34% of single, compared with 12.64% of ever married women who have obtained post-secondary school qualifications.

Of further interest in Table 4 is the evidence that the proportion of single women in professional occupations increased by 4.12% from 1971 to 1976, whilst for ever married women this proportion increased by

TABLE 5

QUALIFICATIONS OBTAINED BY SINGLE AND EVER MARRIED
WOMEN AGED 30 AND OVER—MELBOURNE STATISTICAL
DIVISION

<i>Qualification</i>	1971 ^a		1976 ^b	
	% <i>SW</i> (N= 45,923)	% <i>EMW</i> (N= 561,000)	% <i>SW</i> (N= 44,704)	% <i>EMW</i> (N= 593,518)
*Higher degree	0.51	0.12	0.79	0.18
*Graduate diploma	{ 2.80	{ 0.82	0.95	0.27
*Bachelor degree			2.86	0.89
*Diploma/Other tertiary	7.86	2.56	8.27	2.96
Technician: includes—	7.12	2.89	7.75	3.59
*nursing certificate	(6.03)	(2.36)	(6.72)	(2.89)
Trade	1.25	1.79	2.06	2.53
Not classifiable by level	3.41	2.56	2.59	2.18
Inadequately described	0.01	0.01	0.07	0.04
Total with qualifications	22.96	10.76	25.34	12.64
Total not qualified	77.04	89.23	51.88	70.01
Not stated	n.a.	n.a.	22.78	17.35
	100.00	99.98†	100.00	100.00

* See text for discussion.

† 1971 percentages are based on estimated populations as the ABS *Qualifications Obtained* tables did not provide a 30-34 age category (only a 25-34 category). Percentages, therefore, may not total 100.00.

Sources:

^a Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1971 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Population Aged 15 Years and Over—Sex by Marital Status by Qualifications Obtained by Age*, Canberra, 1974.

^b Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1976 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Age by Marital Status by Qualifications Obtained by Sex, Population Aged 15 and Over*, Canberra, 1979.

2.26%. For single women this increase was matched by slightly decreased percentages in all other occupational categories; for ever married women this was true of all categories *except* Clerical, which showed a 3% increase from 1971 to 1976. Similar, but smaller increases occurred in 1976 in the numbers of women who obtained qualifications: Table 5 shows that 2.38% more single and 1.88% more ever married women had obtained post-secondary qualifications in 1976 than in 1971. Increases were spread evenly over all categories.

Although single women were overrepresented in professional occupations, this group nevertheless formed a relatively small proportion of working single women: 66% of employed single women were in non-professional/non-managerial jobs in 1976. A particularly large number

of single women were found in the clerical occupations which comprise group III in Table 4; 38.49% of single women being employed in such conventional female occupations as typist, stenographer, clerk and telephonist in 1976, compared with 28.17% of ever married women aged 30 and over.²³

The underrepresentation of single women in occupational groups IV, V and VI is to be expected, given their overrepresentation in the higher status occupations. Twenty-four per cent of single women and 47.93% of ever married women were in the lower three occupational categories in 1976. Again, this latter group of single women cluster amongst such conventional female occupations as dressmaker, sales assistant and domestic worker. Few single women work as electricians, carpenters or painters. Of the few women who have penetrated these male strongholds, relatively more are ever married than single.²⁴

But lower status single women workers are not exceptional in holding predominantly female occupations: almost three-quarters of professional single women are in the female dominated occupations of teaching and nursing. Blake remarked on the same phenomenon when discussing women's employment trends in the western world:

The relatively high proportion of women in the professional and technical category is misleading. Women cluster in the *low level* professions, the majority of professional women being schoolteachers, nurses, librarians and social workers.²⁵

This type of clustering would appear to explain the income distribution pattern of single women which was discussed earlier: relatively few single women are in the highest income categories, but larger numbers cluster in the middle to high income categories.

In summary, the data on occupations indicate that although single women *are* overrepresented, relative to ever married women, in professional occupations, their numbers are not such that they can be said to be storming the bastions of such high-prestige, male-dominated professions as law, medicine and engineering.

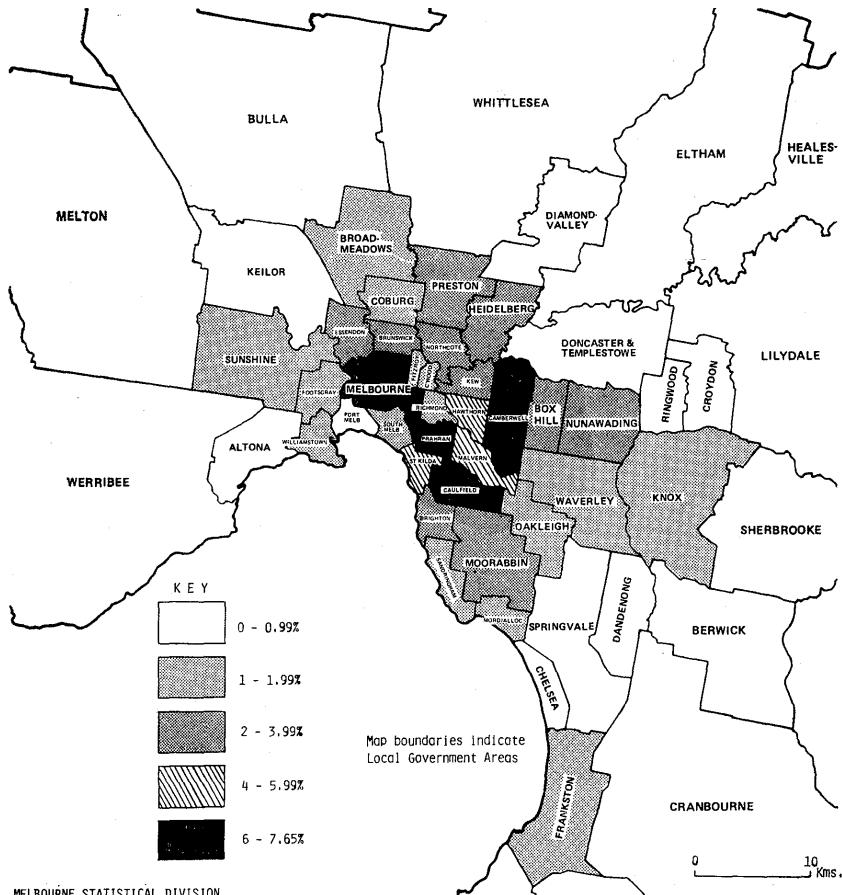
RESIDENTIAL PATTERNS

Further information on the socioeconomic status of single women is provided in Figure 1 which shows the population distribution of single women in the Melbourne Statistical Division by Local Government Area (LGA). The most obvious pattern in the distribution is one of a decreasing number of single women as distance from the central city increases. No doubt, this clustering of single women around the central

business district may be attributed in part to the ready access which is afforded to work, entertainment and single accommodation. However, it is clear from Figure 1 that proximity to the city is not the sole factor contributing to this pattern, as the population of single women is not uniformly distributed around the city centre.

A socioeconomic ranking of Melbourne's LGAs was performed and was found to reveal an association between the SES of an LGA and the

FIGURE 1



Incidence of Single Women Aged 30 and Over in Melbourne. Population of single women 30+ in each Local Government Area as a percentage of all single women 30+ in the Melbourne Statistical Division, 1976 ($N = 44,894$).

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1976 Census of Population and Housing, Australia. Crosstabulated Data: *Table 1. Preliminary Characteristics—Marital Status and Birthplace by Age Group*, Canberra, 1978.

density of the single women's population.²⁶ Of the seven LGAs in Figure 1 which have the highest densities of single women, five fall in the highest category (rank I) on the five point SES scale (the five are Camberwell, Hawthorn, Malvern, Melbourne and Prahran). In fact, single women are substantially overrepresented, relative to ever married women, in six of the nine highest ranked LGAs, and marginally overrepresented in another two. Thirty eight per cent of single women live in rank I areas, compared with 19.62% of Melbourne's ever married women. Another 19% of single, and 20% of ever married women, live in rank II LGAs.

Logan, Maher, McKay and Humphreys, in their socioeconomic analysis of Melbourne, have found that six of the seven LGAs where single women are most heavily concentrated are characterized not only by high SES, but also by high density dwellings.²⁷ (The six LGAs are Caulfield, Hawthorn, Malvern, Melbourne, Prahran and St Kilda. Camberwell is the exception.) Doncaster-Templestowe, which is the one high status LGA conspicuous for its absence of single women, has a very low ratio of flats.

Although overrepresentation of single women occurs in some lower status LGAs, when population figures from low SES areas are combined, single women are shown to be underrepresented, with 38% of single, but 50% of ever married women, living in rank III, IV and V LGAs.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the majority of single women live within a few miles of the central city area, relatively few choosing to join married couples and their children in the exodus to outer suburbia. Whilst proximity to the inner city's employment and/or entertainment opportunities appears to be an important consideration in choice of dwelling location for most single women, SES appears to strongly influence the final pattern of their distribution around this centre.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From various vantage points, demographic data appear to confirm Havens' US finding that the proportion of single women increases with increasing levels of income.²⁸ Income levels for Australian single women replicate this pattern almost exactly, and on SES measures of occupation, educational qualifications and residential location, Melbourne's single women are overrepresented in higher status categories, relative to ever married women. Concomitantly, they are underrepresented in lower status categories on these measures. From the demographic data presented it appears there is not one, but a diversity of profiles of single women.

Firstly, there is the group which rates highly on the SES measures just enumerated, comprising roughly 30% of all single women. A second group consists of somewhat more than one third of single women, who are in clerical or similar occupations. Possibly these women live in middle status suburbs and have lower educational qualifications. Finally, roughly one quarter of single women are likely to be in lower status occupations, having little or no educational qualifications.

In the light of these groupings, it is of interest to note that Logan, Maher, McKay and Humphreys identified an 'ethnicity factor' in their SES analysis of Melbourne. Anglican religion loaded on one end of this factor and Roman Catholic religion, southern European origin and 'blue collar' workforce loaded on the other end.²⁹ It could be suggested, therefore, that the first, higher SES group of single women are more likely to be of Anglican religion, whilst the third, lower SES group are more likely to be Catholic and of ethnic origin (appropriately cross-tabulated data are not available from the ABS to confirm these speculations).

Can we draw any conclusions concerning the aptness or otherwise of the spinster stereotype for these different groups of single women? Adams has made some observations pertinent to this question.³⁰ She has suggested that because the single woman lacks a clearly defined social role, she may find it difficult to develop a consistent sense of her own identity and, as a consequence, may be led to adopt the stereotypical behaviours of the spinster or old maid. However, Adams does not believe this to be the case for all single women: some avoid the pitfalls of stereotyping because they possess, as an important feature of their identity, the attributes of psychological autonomy. She argues that the psychologically autonomous single woman values her independence, the world of ideas, her work, and displays such characteristics as assertiveness and competence. Havens, too, questions the sweeping generality of the spinster stereotype and suggests that the achieving single woman, rather than being the 'marital reject' of the spinster stereotype, may have rejected marriage in favour of a career. Furthermore, Baker argues that the roles of wife and mother are not the only viable ones available to women: for some women, at least, their careers provide a major source of identity and fulfilment—as is generally the case with men.³¹

Taken in the context of the present study, it seems more likely that single women in professional (or similarly challenging) careers would be able to find their sense of identity through a career, and to possess the attributes of psychological autonomy. To have achieved their present status, single women in professional careers are also likely to have been more resourceful and secure in their sense of identity in the first place.

But what of the majority of working single women who are in middle and lower status occupations (groups 2 and 3 of this study): might their sense of identity derive from their work? Baker questions whether single women employed in 'non-creative and menial tasks'³² would find the same degree of satisfaction in their work as women in professional occupations. No doubt, the quality of work, and the degree of fulfilment to be obtained from it will vary widely in middle and lower status occupations. However, it might be conjectured that single women working in 'non-creative and menial tasks' would be more inclined to assume the spinster stereotype as an identity, being unable to derive from their work the same sense of identity that single women obtain from more satisfying, higher status occupations.

In conclusion, the present demographic study found single women to be overrepresented amongst women ranking highly on various conventional measures of success and status, whilst they are underrepresented amongst those in lower status positions. Nevertheless, a majority of single women are of middle and lower socioeconomic status. It has been argued that single women of lower SES may lack a clearly defined social role and are therefore more likely to assume the identity of the spinster stereotype. Single women of higher SES, however, may be more likely to be misrepresented by the spinster stereotype; partly because their professional careers are more likely to provide them with a source of identity and partly because the characteristics required to achieve success are not consistent with those of the stereotype.

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